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Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly, entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century": implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern and further actions and initiatives

Statement submitted by the Canadian Association of Elizabeth Fry Societies, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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Statement*

1. The Canadian Association of Elizabeth Fry Societies exists to advocate for the human rights of criminalized women — both nationally and internationally. Despite a lack of evidence of increased crime rates, imprisonment of women is increasing at an alarming rate, with numbers doubling in several countries over the past decade. The vast majority of women prisoners are victims of violent crime, particularly abuse as an adult and/or child. Most are poor; many are homeless prior to imprisonment. The majority face mental health and/or substance abuse issues.

2. Women prisoners' right to education, training and access to full employment and decent work continues to be systemically breached in Australia, Canada and throughout the world. As a result, criminalized women are trapped in a downward spiral of poverty and powerlessness, and generally leave prison at increased risk of further criminalization.

3. Internationally, most women are criminalized as a result of previous failures to address these and other basic human rights. Prison populations are characterized by the highly disproportionate numbers of women from socially disadvantaged groups. Most women are imprisoned for minor offences as a direct or indirect result of poverty, particularly non-violent property- and drug-related offences. Women's vulnerability to committing poverty-related crime is exacerbated by the failure of Member States to meet their obligations to provide adequate and appropriate education, training and access to employment.

4. Further, the majority of women prisoners are mothers of dependent children, and were the primary family's main source of income prior to imprisonment. The failure of Member States to meet women's rights also breaches the rights of their children, which perpetuates poverty and condemns the children of women prisoners to a significantly increased risk of criminalization in later life.

5. In both Australia and Canada, opportunities for education and training for women prisoners have deteriorated over recent years. Prison authorities also rely on prisoner labour. As a result, more women prisoners are required to perform menial prison and certain industrial labour, rather than participate in education or training. Compared to male prisoners, women have little choice of prison labour, despite substantial evidence that the provision of education and training to women prisoners can play an essential role in reducing recidivism rates and improving the overall post-release prognosis for women and their children.

6. Programmes commonly associated with education and training in women's prisons fall into four categories:

- Offending-related programmes provided by prison authorities
- Other educational programmes provided by prison authorities
- Minimal vocational training associated with prison labour provided by prison authorities
- Access to education and training provided by non-prison bodies

* Issued without formal editing.

Offending-related programmes

7. So-called "compulsory" rehabilitation programmes, provided by prison authorities for women prisoners, should not be confused with education or training. They do not meet the definition of education in article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and in Economic and Social Council resolution 1990/20.

8. These programmes have little currency beyond prison walls. With few exceptions, they are generally designed for male prisoners. They address the criminogenic profile of male prisoners, which is very different from that of women prisoners. The programmes are therefore of negligible value in their stated goal of reducing recidivism among women prisoners. Further, they fail to provide women prisoners with education or training, which improves their ability to overcome poverty through accessing full employment and decent work. And, since completion of these programmes is often a requirement of parole, women's lesser access to these programmes than men commonly results in delays in women's release, and extended hardship for their families and children.

Other prison-run educational programmes

9. Women prisoners consistently report that the quality of programmes provided by prison authorities (such as numeracy/literacy and art/craft) is unacceptable. Limited choices are available to women, and most are sex-role stereotyped. Poor standards of teaching are exacerbated by the fact that prison authorities are increasingly unwilling to allow external educators, particularly non-governmental organizations, to enter prisons and provide educational services.

Training associated with prison labour

10. The industry options available to women prisoners are generally sex-role stereotyped (e.g., food preparation, janitorial duties, textile industries or laundry). Even where the skills developed are marketable, this focus sentences criminalized women to working in low paid, low skilled jobs. Little of the industry-based training available is tied to accredited outcomes that would improve women's opportunities to access full-time, decent work following release. Again, women repeatedly report that the quality of training is exceptionally poor, with so-called "trade instructors" functioning more as worker supervisors than teachers. Few women have access to the means to complete a recognized training programme, due both to the piecemeal offering of parts of these programmes and women's inability to continue a training programme when moved from prison to prison.

External education and training

11. Very few women are allowed to engage in full-time study. These women are also consequently financially penalized, because of lost — albeit minimal — wages, compared with their counterparts who work in other prison employment. (In Queensland, women can earn more than five times the income of a full-time student if they work in prison industries, but this is not generally the situation for women in Canadian prisons.) Furthermore, women must often pay for their study. In Canada, women have limited access to computers and no Internet access, so educational opportunities are even more limited. Even if approved to commence a course of study, women are vulnerable to arbitrary withdrawal of such a privilege. The current

trend towards prison labour camps as the only model of low security imprisonment in Australia, and a lack of minimum security prisons for women in Canada, means women are in higher security prisons, rather than the community, in order to undertake education.

12. In summary, the limited education and training available to women prisoners is highly inadequate. Women prisoners are rarely encouraged to participate actively in all aspects of education and prison authorities consistently fail to facilitate and support education as much as possible. Disadvantaged groups of women (particularly indigenous women; other women from minority racial groups; women with mental and intellectual disabilities; and young women) are particularly vulnerable to discrimination in their access to education. Further, the majority of women prisoners (short-term and remand prisoners) are generally ineligible for external education and few qualify to participate in prison-run programmes.

13. Ultimately, limited access to community-recognized education and training reduces women's opportunities of gaining full employment and decent work following release. It is essential that education and training for women prisoners include developmental education (e.g., secondary, post-secondary and vocational), opportunities for quality formal on-the-job training, part-time developmental courses and self-directed learning. Women's prisons should provide learning-friendly environments, supported by positive attitudes from prison authorities and ready access to libraries and other study facilities.

14. Improvements in women's access to education, training, full employment and decent work — both within and outside prisons — could play a central role in stemming the current epidemic of criminalization of women, and its accompanying multi-generational threats. Our success in addressing women's human rights should be measured by our ability to address the rights of the most vulnerable populations — including women prisoners.